

# **Maitreyi Chatterjee (26 January 1940–17 January 2012): Tribute to a Life of Passion, Warmth, Struggle and Dynamism**

Sunday 12 February 2012, by [MARIK Soma](#) (Date first published: 18 January 2012).

*“Hello Soma. You haven’t called me for a long time. Were you out of town? Or is your throat posing a problem once again?”* - I would get this phone call several times every year. Maitreyidi was one of those who always remembered that I suffer from a bad throat, and since I have to teach, often end up not talking to people on other occasions, skipping meetings because I would have to talk there, and so on.

I first met Maitreyidi in the mid-1980s, when I was just getting involved in the autonomous women’s movement. At that time I was a member of Sachetana. At that stage we had limited relationship. However, one memory sticks out. I did not then have a long political past, and hesitated to approach many of the members who had longer years in politics and linkages going back several years. But Maitreyidi had the knack of talking without any condescension. In 1987, following the murder of Roop Kanwar, there was a rally in Kolkata and the Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha was one of the major organisers. This was how I became well acquainted with the Mancha. The militant approach of Mancha members was an important factor in my deciding subsequently that I needed to be there.

Then for several years the nature of my job kept me out of practically all political work. When at last I was able to return to political work, the women’s movement had changed quite a bit, with a large number of NGOs and Voluntary Organisations working mainly along particular areas. (Maitreyidi used to call the voluntary organisations Voltu). This was when I became active in the Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha, around 1992-3 and one member of Mancha suggested that I might occasionally come to the Friday Mancha meetings. Maitreyidi’s immediate reaction was - why occasionally, try to be regular. Maitreyidi’s residence was the Mancha office, and Maitreyidi herself was in those days fully active. Not only was she politically alert, but she also cared for the individual well being of the members, and kept in regular touch through phone.

In the 1990s, work over numerous issues - state/communal violence on women, the Uniform Civil Code controversy, all brought us closer. In 1996, there was an all India workshop on Gender Just Laws. Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha presented a position paper on the Uniform Civil Code, a text hammered out through numerous meetings by many members of Mancha, including Maitreyidi. She was also among those who travelled to Mumbai to present our views on that and other issues.

Being active in a political movement which does not compromise with political parties, especially over the struggle against patriarchy, has its pains. Several times, we faced difficulties because the use of patriarchal authority had come from forces considered friends of women’s movements. In all cases, I found Maitreyidi taking a strong position on women’s rights, and refusing to tone down her views just because a “friendly” party/activist was involved.

Another dimension was her willingness to be aggressive in defence of the rights of women. A well known study of the women’s movements in West Bengal and Bombay/Maharashtra characterised the Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha, (of which Maitreyi Chatterjee was the Convenor), as an

organisation having “sensationalist and politically irresponsible actions”. As it is well known, women, even when they dare to come to the political stage, must always be decorous and timid, as respectable academics will otherwise tar them with such brushes. Maitreyi Chatterjee, like many other Mancha members, rejected these imposed codes. Precisely for rejecting this gentility, the Mancha was depicted as sensationalist and politically irresponsible. Two instances of our “irresponsibility”, one collective with her participation, and the other entirely her own, might be mentioned here.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1998, Rekha Chowdhury, a national basketball player, was assaulted by upper class youth, resulting in her hospitalisation. Next morning, when the news of this assault appeared in a Calcutta daily newspaper, the police had yet done nothing, and in this situation members of Maitree, at that time a 36-organisation West Bengal based network, got in touch with each other and quickly organised a demonstration in front of the B. R. Singh Hospital, near the Sealdah Station. It was a Sunday, so there were no ministers in their offices. No senior policeman was available for comment either. It was therefore decided that protests would be lodged at the residence of the Home (Police) Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee. Despite her age and her physical ailments Maitreyi Chatterjee was also one of those, along with the even more senior Vidya Munshi, who stayed the entire duration, vocally shouting slogans. The incident, which would have been hushed up as a mere accident but for pressure from Maitree, now had to be investigated at least a little bit.

The other occasion was an article entitled *Hell's Angels* by Maitreyidi, tearing into the government run Homes for women like the Liluah Home, where in one year a large number of suicide attempts had been recorded and a deaf-mute pregnant girl (pregnant due to rape) ill-treated. She had also posed uncomfortable questions about the State Commission for Women. This resulted in an exchange of letters in *The Statesman*, in which, in my opinion, she certainly came off best.

But this principled stance did not mean that she was just a person who thought in narrowly political terms. Her politics was not cold and calculating but passionate. Injustice stirred her deeply, and her indictments were written from the heart. More than a decade back, we organised a seminar on Human Rights in our college, in which she was one of the speakers. Many of the speakers spoke as academics do, scholarly, serious works, but devoid of feeling. Maitreyidi spoke about women's rights, and students could identify with what she was saying, because it was evident she herself was speaking from personal convictions, not merely presenting a paper.

Something I saw repeatedly in Maitreyidi was an all India perspective and a staunch anti-communalism. She never succumbed to what existed as a real trend in the social movements — a provincial narrowness that saw the CPI(M) as the only reality and the only threat. Whether it was the Unifrom Civil Code controversy, the rights of Muslim women, the Gujarat pogroms and violence on women, she would tell me things like, “we have to make clear our differences with the BJP” as well as, “I don't agree at all with the CPI(M)s politics where it papers over minority communalism and is silent about the rights of minority community women”.

At a personal level again, whenever I have been discouraged, Maitreyidi was a source of strength, telling me that there was no reason to give up on my activism, and supporting me in particularly difficult periods. At critical moments in life, especially when downturns occurred in the movement, or when unexpected blows left me depressed, I found her by my side. The silent way in which she left us was a great blow. It is difficult to reconcile with that the image of Maitreyidi I have, always ready to take up a cause, ready to fight the good fight.

**Soma Marik**

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**P.S.**

\* Wednesday, January 18, 2012 at 10:32pm:

<http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/national-situation/443-maitreyi-chatterjee-26-january-194017-january-2012-tribute-to-a-life-of-passion-warmth-struggle-and-dynamism>